WHAT ELSE CAN A SPINDLE BE?

THE PLAYFUL CREATIVITY OF MICHAEL HOSALUK

Betty J. Scarpino

Written on the board at the start of a Hosaluk class: "If it looks like it was turned, you are doing something wrong."

Photos by Trent Watts, except where noted.

Michael Hosaluk's favorite word seems to be "fun," and fun we had during the weeklong class I took from him at Arrowmont in 1994. As I was to realize years later, the makeup of this class was extraordinary because everyone was an experienced woodturner and we were there to learn about Michael's techniques, processes, and thinking, beyond basic woodturning.

Even Michael seemed surprised that by Wednesday evening, we had eagerly accomplished all of his assignments and wanted more. He had us stumped, though, with his last suggestion: "Make a chain with no links." We could hear his distinctive laughter as he walked out the woodshop door.

Community

Throughout history, artists have come together, meeting in informal and formal groups to discuss ideas and share experiences. Many of these salons, clubs, classes, and symposia have been instrumental in starting and expanding artistic movements. While this is a broad, general statement, that phenomenon is true in our woodturning field. The growth and development of contemporary woodturning owes its roots to events that brought like-minded, creative people together to share similar experiences in places such as Arrowmont School for Arts and Crafts, AAW Symposia, Emma in Saskatchewan, Canada, the Wood Turning Center's World Turning

(*Left*) *Essential Tools for Life*, 2019, Bronze, each: ¾" × 14" × 2" (19mm × 36cm × 5cm)

(*Right*) *Faces* (woodcut block print), 2002, Paper, ink, 11" × 8" (28cm × 20cm)

Conferences, and symposia in France, Utah, Great Britain, as well as collaborative weekends in New Zealand, Echo Lake in Pennsylvania, and elsewhere.

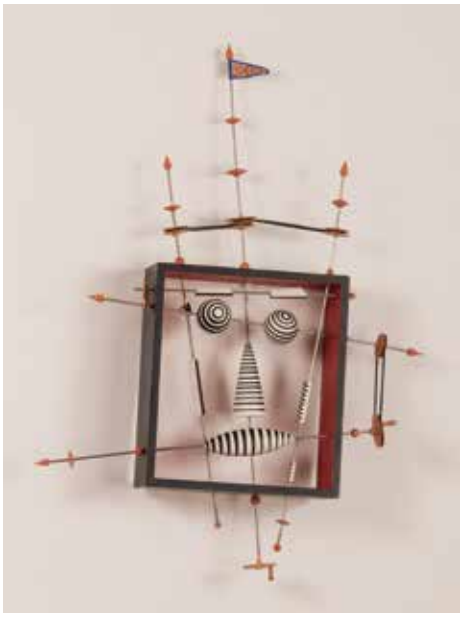
Michael Hosaluk played a key role in all of those early gatherings as a major demonstrator, participant, and organizer. To this day, he continues to bring woodturners together for playful, creative experiences, in person or through collaborative projects. In doing so, he has been one of the major driving factors in woodturning's expansion beyond traditional spindles for chairs and treenware for everyday use. Often, he seems to operate surreptitiously, all the while magically fueling enthusiasm and fostering camaraderie.

One of the many tangible ways Michael helps create community is through the baseballs he turns and gives away. Vast numbers of individuals and groups, such as Balls for Education, have achieved "homeruns" at fundraising events from auctioning Mike's woodturned and signed baseballs. Michael often says, "Give a little more than you take." The idea behind the baseballs is for people involved in the fundraiser to sign it and then offer it at auction, thus furthering inclusiveness. Even dearly departed woodturners get to participate: "We had Mel Lindquist sign a ball long after he had passed. Mark [Mel's son] said, 'You just sign with a bit of a shake.'"

Facial imagery

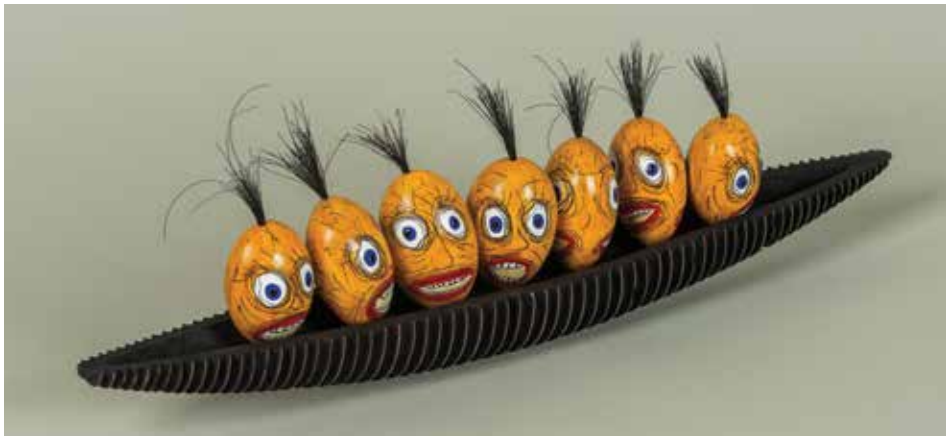
The faces that Michael carves, paints, and scribbles onto the surfaces of random objects peek out from colorful cargo trafficked in boat-like vessels. Self-portraits and woodcut-printed faces stare directly at viewers, stopping them in their tracks. Subversive assemblages invite closer looks, and teapots with faces seem to pour out their enthusiastic agreement whenever Michael brews mischief.

No rendition is too outlandish for Michael. Each object in his *Bowl of Strange and Unusual Objects* seems strangely familiar, yet not nameable. We humans have a penchant for naming objects—it's a self-preservation mechanism in our cluttered world. When faced with not knowing, however, we are freed up to become intrigued by the unknown. Once we attach a name to something, we tend to stop exploring its characteristics: "Oh, that's a pear" or "It's a pineapple," all somehow *knowable*. Michael's colorful, quirky fruits beg to be picked up and visually devoured, preserving the act of truly seeing. Beware, though, they are looking at you, too. ▶



Self Portrait As An Eccentric Frenchman, 1998, Maple, boxwood, metal, paper, rubber O-rings, copper, acrylic paint, 3" × 24" × 15" (8cm × 61cm × 38cm)

Expedition, 2013, Madrone, birch, horsehair, acrylic paint, brass, 4" × 16" × 3½" (10cm × 41cm × 9cm)



Bowl of Strange and Unusual Objects, 2019, Birch, maple, arbutus, horsehair, bronze, acrylic paint, dye, milk paint, 9" × 32" × 6" (23cm × 81cm × 15cm)

The design on the outside of this vessel is a motif borrowed from line drawings done by Michael.

The Mark and Mikey Show

Michael Hosaluk and Mark Sfirri formed an immediate bond upon meeting at the second AAW Symposium in Philadelphia, 1988. Then, in 1992, Michael invited Mark to a turning conference at the Kelsey Institute in Saskatoon. During a rotation, when most of the attendees were watching a demo by Richard Raffan, the two took the time for playful making. That episode laid the foundation for a long collaborative relationship that continues to this day.

Mark had been collaborating with painter Robert Dodge since 1986 but had recently stopped that association so he could make a go of it as a solo artist. "That was short-lived," Mark explains, "as Michael and I started collaborating at that [1992] conference." The first *Mark and Mikey Show*, 1993, featured eighty-five pieces and was hosted by the Sansar Gallery in Washington, D.C. Both artists lectured at the Renwick Gallery in support of the exhibition. A 10th-anniversary show was mounted in 2003 at Tercera Gallery in Palo Alto, California. The two now fondly call any joint workshops or demos *The Mark and Mikey Show*.

Lively banter at the Instant Gallery. Clockwise from top left: Michael Hosaluk, Mark Sfirri, Jane Mason, Sharon Bierman, and Don Bierman, 2016 AAW Symposium, Atlanta, Georgia.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

Mark Sfirri and Michael Hosaluk, *Trumpot*, 1996, Maple, paint, 7½" × 7" × 5" (19cm × 18cm × 13cm)

The Center for Art in Wood Museum Collection, Gift of Tim and Sheryl Kochman

Photo: John Carlano

Some Young Guys, circa 1995, turning by Michael Hosaluk, carving and painting by Mark Sfirri.

Playfulness

Over the years, especially in Michael's early production-work phase, he's turned hundreds of traditional lidded boxes. They didn't sell well. His solution? Make them totally useless while having fun experimenting. Take away their base, stretch contours, dissect, and embellish. Idiosyncratic boxes have become quintessential Michael Hosaluk, while very much remaining recognizable as boxes: lids resonate with the distinctive "pop" of a perfectly fitted turned box. No need to fill them with objects, as they already contain bountiful joy, humor, and love-of-making.

Michael literally has stretched the idea and concept of boxes in the same way he intellectually stretches the limitations of many of his functional pieces. He begins by focusing on just one element—the spout of a teapot, for example, or the orientation of a lidded box. Enliven the spout by introducing gesture via compound curves. Convince boxes to open lengthwise without dictating a specific orientation, which otherwise would have been decreed by traditional flat bases. Lengthening becomes a natural design progression. Elongating wasn't enough for Michael, though. He began slicing boxes apart at irregular angles, then gluing the pieces back together, concocting compound angles. And, if that wasn't enough, he cuts some of those long boxes lengthwise, removes a center section, and glues the outer layers together to render them oval in cross-section. *Then* he cuts the lengths apart at angles, regluing them.

Small groupings of Michael's boxes speak of community, dynamic interactions, and

figurative sculpture. Just when we assume Michael has dismissed flat bases, he re-introduces them to provide a foundation for congregating. These forms, abstractly human, anticipate mingling by hands eager to physically interact with art objects. What Michael produces literally represents his community involvement. Any one of his boxes is delightful, but when they are presented as a group, we are invited to engage with their playfulness.

This spirit also comes through in Michael's fish. Aside from their spiky, colorful embellishments, they look deceptively simple to make. Pick one up, though, and egads, they're hollow! We know fish don't have feathers, but these are as light as a feather. In spite of initially being hollow-turned, Michael's fish appear to be round, but they're not. To transform their profiles from round to oval, Michael cuts them apart on the bandsaw, lengthwise, removing a slice from the center. He then glues the two outer sections back together—presto, oval! I've seen Michael make a fish body in just a few minutes, seemingly a basic demonstration, but his efficiency belies the wealth of knowledge at his command. ▸

(*Above*) *The Conversation*, 2009, Maple, copper, acrylic paint, 8" × 12" × 4" (20cm × 30cm × 10cm)

(*Left*) *Nesting*, 2020, Maple, white and black gesso, 10" × 16" × 16" (25cm × 41cm × 41cm)

(*Bottom left*) *Intimacy*, 2018, Maple, acrylic paint, molding paste, 7" × 14" × 8" (18cm × 36cm × 20cm)

(*Bottom right*) *Fish*, 2012, Birch, maple, toothpicks, rice paper, acrylic paint, dye, each: 6" × 4" × 7" (15cm × 10cm × 18cm)

MORE ON EMMA LAKE

EXPLORE!

To learn more about the Emma Lake collaborative event, check out these articles in the AAW archives. Log in at woodturner.org and Explore!

- **"Conservation & Collaboration: Pullout Out the Stops at Emma Lake," by Mark Sfirri (December 1996, vol 11, no 4, page 22)**
- **"Breaking the Barriers: Emma Lake Conjures a New Way of Thinking," by Terry Martin (Winter 1998, vol 13, no 4, page 26)**

The spirit of creative fun overflows. Emma Lake collaborative event, Saskatoon, Canada, 2018. From left: Michael Hosaluk, Andy Buck, Kim Kelzer, Mark Sfirri, Russell Baldon.

Photo: Laura Hosaluk

Emma

Trolling deeper into Michael's past, David Ellsworth was an influence for Michael's early exploration of hollow turning. The two first met in 1981 at Albert LeCoff's tenth George School woodturning symposium, held at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania. Michael traveled there to meet other woodturners whose work had also been selected for inclusion in The Wood Turning Center's first International Turned Objects Show, held in conjunction with the symposium. As a result of meeting other like-minded makers and wanting further connections, Michael invited David Ellsworth, Del Stubbs, and Rudy Osolnik to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, where they were joined by Giles Blais, a local blacksmith. Although it would take a few more years for it to become today's hugely successful, worldwide collaborative event, Emma Lake was spawned. Michael calls this biennial gathering simply "Emma" because for him, it's like a living thing.

It would be difficult to overstate just how important Emma was and is to our woodturning community. This underground movement, existing subversively in out-of-the-way Saskatoon, fosters playfulness, sparks new designs, and connects collaborators from a variety of art media. Above all, it has been and is Michael's personal playground. He writes, "I would meet so many people from audiences at demonstrations, my peers, who were so talented, I thought it important to create a forum where we all learned from each other."

During this five-day making fest, an uninitiated observer wandering the grounds might ask, "Who's in charge?" No one ... and everyone! Make no mistake though, Michael's hard work organizing, as well as physically moving and setting up the machines and equipment, make it happen. During the crazy days of making, however, Michael is no more obvious than anyone else.

Design and influences

Michael is known for saying, "From the minute we are born, our lives are influenced by everything around us." These influences, in turn, inform our artwork, consciously or unconsciously. Shortly after Michael began embellishing some of his functional production work, a woman at a local craft fair asked him if his heritage was Ukrainian. Surprised, he asked why. The design he had burned onto the outside of a bowl ▸

Future Species, 1994, Elm, maple, casein paint, 14" × 4" (36cm × 10cm)

To give the leg/body union the look of a natural outgrowth, Michael turned beads around the vessel at the height he wanted the legs, then carved away the wood in between each leg, leaving a receptacle-bump. He drilled holes under those projections and then glued the legs into the holes.

(*Above*) *Turn Tables*, 2019, Maple, milk paint, vintage gramophone turntables, each: 24" × 12" (61cm × 30cm)

(*Far left*) *Blue Cabinet*, 2019, Pine, yellow cedar, milk paint, brass, glass, 34" × 16" × 10" (86cm × 41cm × 25cm)

(*Left*) *Self Portrait as Candlesticks*, 2005, Maple, acrylic paint, copper, tallest: 11" × 6" × 4" (28cm × 15cm × 10cm)

Acts of Chairorism

Sidebar photos by Malcolm Zander.

For Michael, chairs are not just for sitting (although he constructed many functional chairs during his furnituremaking years). His *Acts of Chairorism* project engaged unsuspecting audiences with his playfulness. In one scenario, imagine a gallery full of 100 or more chairs and visitors encouraged to arrange and re-arrange them. Or, harder yet to imagine is Michael's outdoor *Acts of Chairorism* in Canada. He "installed" chair frames on trees, fences, and other objects in various public spaces, causing people to pause and wonder—and prompting city officials to remove them.

Looking across the Ottawa River from Quebec's Museum of History to Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario.

Chair attached to railings at the federal Parliament building in Ottawa. Malcolm Zander notes, "The Mounties had it removed within three hours."

Michael glued a chair to the median railing on the Macdonald-Cartier Bridge, exactly at the border between Ottawa (Ontario) and Gatineau (Quebec), the center of the span. Zander predicted that with all the different levels of bureaucracy involved, it would take the two governments six months to decide who should remove it. It did indeed take six months.

Tri-Cone, 1987, Birch, maple, 6" × 10" × 10" (15cm × 25cm × 25cm)

The Center for Art in Wood Museum Collection, Gift of the Artist

Structures, 1988, Birch, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), aluminum, 7" × 15" × 14" (18cm × 38cm × 36cm)

she was admiring was distinctively of Ukrainian origin. While he had not consciously drawn a Ukrainian pattern, his internalized family heritage spontaneously appeared in his artwork.

Before becoming immersed in woodturning, Michael worked as a cabinetmaker and furnituremaker, primarily self-taught. Having grown up on a remote farm, he found nothing was beyond learning how to do. Self-reliant, farmers are known for finding creative solutions for difficult problems.

History of Woodturning Compressed/Bird Bowl/Blue Bowl, 2018, Yellow cedar, acrylic paint, dye, copper, graphite, maple, Plexiglas, unknown substance, 12" × 12" × 2" (30cm × 30cm × 5cm)

Michael's work prior to woodturning highly influenced his can-do approach to design. Now, functional cabinets and furniture are mutated into uniquely Michael creations.

The foundation for Michael's work is form. He can visualize form in a block of wood, and from there he shapes that form using a variety of methods. He prefers plain wood—its inviting surface acts as a 3D canvas, welcoming surface embellishments. The finale Michael seeks is all the elements composing themselves into a cohesive expression. According to Michael, "You cannot just take a bad form and hope you can make it into something by using color and texture. Get that foundation right at the beginning. Practice until you can get the form right."

Like all of us, Michael is influenced by other woodturners' work, often abstracting one or more distinctive element and then incorporating or expanding upon it. No direct copying, but always open to influences. For instance, the concept behind Mark Sfirri's *Rejects from the Bat Factory*—off-set-turned baseball bats—kick started Michael's distinctive candleholders, as did Jean-François Escoulen's impossible-to-imagine off-set-turned delights. Michael's candleholders, however, only *appear* to be

From the Garden, 2017, Paper print, pencil, crayons, ink pen, 29" × 22" (74cm × 56cm)

exclusively offset-turned. In reality, they are assembled from a variety of turned and perhaps cut-apart fragments (some of which may have been offset-turned). Given a pile of possibilities, Michael consistently constructs cohesive candleholders. I am happy to be hoodwinked.

Similar thinking was behind Michael's architectural vessels, *Tri-Cone* and *Structures*. They have segments, but not in the manner associated with our conventional concept of segmenting. Well-placed beam-like segments dissect and/or support a cone-shaped vessel; various layers have windows; and internal beams visually link walls together, all suggestive of architectural elements.

Michael's elongated, angled boxes and multi-part candleholders grew out of his ever-evolving design process. He assimilates a concept—off-set turning for instance—and then devises his own versions. Yes, he does incorporate offset turnings in his candleholders and other assemblages. However, each offset-turned spindle is different from all the others, if only slightly. Michael says it would take the fun out of it if he had to figure out formulas for predictable results. He has a knack for finding balance with imbalance, no rulers or protractors required. He learns as he goes and is able to intuitively visualize how to mount and re-mount a spindle on the lathe to make it flow harmoniously. And if a particular design doesn't work for one object, he sets it aside for future use.

Michael has literally framed his concept of change over time with *History of Woodturning Compressed/Bird Bowl/Blue Bowl*. We turners can intuit that reconstructing the pieces would reveal their origin as a bowl. If asked, Michael might offer a humorous, made-up story. This framed, exploded vessel isn't quite wall-art yet, though. It stands on its own and can be viewed from both front and back. Michael has, however, been drawing on paper the past two decades, as this is another outlet for his playful creativity.

Key element: focus

In a recent discussion, Merryll Saylan, a well-known first-generation woodturning artist, and I talked about the importance and differences between "knowledge of techniques, machines, materials, processes" and "the ability to creatively think of design ideas." Which is more central to success as an artist, or are they of equal significance? Which comes first, or do they seemingly grow up together?

It is abundantly obvious that Michael has a wealth of creative ideas *and* the technical knowhow to figure out how to make anything his mind imagines. In considering Michael's career, both elements have been interwoven, fertilized by an innate drive to make stuff. There is another element, however, that Michael has in spades: an ability to focus. On various occasions, I have seen him quietly walk away from contentious discussions, headed toward some aspect of playful making. He fills his mind and time with, "What can I make next?"

Almost thirty years ago, I took that class from Michael to learn what makes him such a prolific, creative maker. While I don't know all the answers, I do have a better understanding of those special qualities common to individuals like Michael. Over the years, he has shared so much of his enthusiasm and knowledge with all his well-loved, strange-fruit folks. His advice: "Never not do what you think of—there might be only one element to take you to the next step." Thinking back on my experience during that class, I consider it a launch pad that helped boost me forward with my own art making.

Michael Hosaluk's website, michaelhosaluk.com, offers more images of his work, tools, and a DVD, which comes highly recommended. ■

Betty J. Scarpino turns, carves, and embellishes wood in her Indianapolis studio. Her artwork and previous articles can be viewed on her website bettyscarpino.com.

SAIDYE BRONFMAN AWARD

Michael Hosaluk has been honored with numerous awards over the years, but perhaps the most significant is Canada's prestigious Saidye Bronfman Award, which he was awarded in 2005. It is the "foremost distinction for excellence in the fine crafts … for exceptional work of individuals who have made significant contributions to the development of the fine crafts in Canada." Michael was awarded $25,000 and a public presentation at the Canadian Museum of History. Visit saidyebronfmanaward.ca/michael-hosaluk.

Photo courtesy of Betty Scarpino.

Michael at an Emma collaborative event, away from the fray, focusing.

Put a Wedge in It

In 2014, the Saskatchewan Craft Council held an exhibition of work by Michael Hosaluk and invited artists. Objects in metal, wood, and multimedia of various sizes were on view, using the wedge as a common theme. View an excellent video about the exhibition at tiny.cc/Wedge.